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**Congress of the United States**  
**House of Representatives**  
**Washington, DC 20515-0533**

HENRY A. WAXMAN  
33RD DISTRICT, CALIFORNIA

March 8, 2013

The Honorable Michael Michaud  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Veterans Affairs  
333 Cannon House Office Building  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Mike:

Thank you for your letter requesting issues of high interest to me that fall within the jurisdiction of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs. I appreciate this opportunity to outline my top priorities for the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress.

The 33<sup>rd</sup> Congressional District, which I represent, includes the Department of Veterans Affairs, West Los Angeles Medical Center (West LA VA), which is the largest medical center in the VA system and the nerve center of the VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System. It serves 1.4 million veterans in Southern California and 530,000 veterans in the greater Los Angeles area.

**Homeless Veterans**

**Priority: Obtain funding for the renovation of Buildings 205 and 208 on the West LA VA campus for housing and long-term therapeutic services for homeless veterans.**

The West LA VA serves the largest population of homeless veterans in the nation. According to the 2012 U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Annual Assessment Report, an estimated 42,353 homeless individuals in the Los Angeles Continuum of Care (this number does not include chronically homeless veterans living on the streets), and veterans make up 16.3% of the adult population of this total.

In 2007, the VA designated three buildings (Buildings 205, 208, and 209) on the West LA VA campus to be renovated for long-term therapeutic services for homeless veterans. Senator Feinstein, Senator Boxer, and I worked to get funding for the renovations, and in 2010, Congress authorized funding for seismic upgrades of the three buildings and \$20 million for the renovation of Building 209. In December 2012, the VA awarded a construction contract for Building 209. The groundbreaking for the project occurred on January 25, 2013. The VA

estimates that the renovation of Building 209 will be completed in July 2014 and will serve 65 homeless veterans.

If the VA's construction estimates are correct, seven years will have passed since Buildings 205, 208, and 209 were designated for homeless services until the first of the three buildings will begin to operate (four years since federal funding was authorized for Building 209). In 2009, Secretary Shinseki pledged to end veteran homelessness in five years. The success or failure of the Secretary's pledge will depend on whether the West LA VA also makes this a priority and ends the delays and unnecessary red tape that are impeding the delivery of housing and services to homeless veterans.

### **West LA VA Land Use**

#### **Priority: Protect the West LA VA property permanently to serve veterans.**

Congress enacted legislation in 1887 to authorize construction of the first soldiers' home in the west, and former Senator John P. Jones and his family donated land in Los Angeles for this purpose. The legal deed conveying the property requires that the government maintain it permanently for veterans. Subsequent legislation passed by Congress in 1988, 1991 and 2007 affirmed that this property is to remain in the possession of the U.S. Veterans Administration (VA) for the benefit of veterans.

Despite the deed restrictions, congressional Republicans have proposed that West LA VA property be sold for budget reduction purposes. The VA has already established, however, that there is very limited potential for the reuse of this property. In 2011, the VA issued its *West Los Angeles VA Medical Center Master Plan*, which states "The areas of the campus open for development or reuse are limited to a very small portion of the property that is not consumed by the CARES capital plan, VA's SCIP process, or existing long term land use agreements."<sup>1</sup>

Auctioning West LA VA property to the highest bidder would bring in some short-term revenue for immediate needs, but it would contradict the terms of the 1888 deed and be a tremendous disservice to our veterans. We have a permanent obligation to keep our promises to our veterans and we have a moral and legal duty to honor the contract that gave us use of the land in the first place.

#### **Priority: Obtain information about private leases and agreements on the West LA VA property.**

The VA has entered into dozens of leases and agreements with private interests over the years. Although the VA has recently reduced this practice, it has not responded to my requests for information about the revenues these leases and agreements have generated and whether they have been used to serve veterans at the West LA VA or for other purposes.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Veterans Affairs, West Los Angeles VA Medical Center, *Veterans Programs Enhancement Act of 1998 Master Plan* (V.1.6 – 6/2011), 24.

## **Construction of the Los Angeles National Cemetery Columbarium**

**Priority: Begin overdue construction of the Los Angeles National Cemetery Columbarium.**

The 2007 Capital Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services (CARES) decision approved a VA intra-agency transfer of 13 acres from the West LA VA to the adjacent Los Angeles National Cemetery for the construction of a columbarium. The columbarium is needed because the Los Angeles National Cemetery has been unable to offer burials to veterans since 1978 and the nearest national cemetery is located in Riverside, California, more than 75 miles away. The project was funded in 2011 and a design contract was issued to REM Engineering Co., Inc. The design was expected to be completed in the summer of 2011 but has been delayed.

## **Improving Veterans' Services**

**Priority: Ensure the Los Angeles VA Regional Office (VARO) complies with recommendations by the VA Inspector General to address failures in the disability claims process.**

In 2012, the VA Office of Inspector General (IG) reported a number of serious shortcomings with disability claims processing at the Los Angeles VA Regional Office (VARO).<sup>2</sup> Of the claims the IG reviewed, the Los Angeles VARO failed to correctly process 60% of veteran disability claims, 97% of temporary 100 percent disability evaluations, 57% of traumatic brain injury (TBI) claims, and 27% of herbicide exposure-related claims. The VA concurred with the IG's findings and agreed to comply with the IG's recommendations for improving claims processing and management.

**Priority: Relocate the Los Angeles Veterans Benefits Office from the Los Angeles Federal Building to the West LA VA Medical Center.**

The 2007 CARES decision approved the relocation of the Los Angeles Veterans Benefits office to the grounds of the West LA VA to provide one-stop service for veterans who need to coordinate their medical care with benefits claims processing. The VA has not yet relocated the Veterans Benefit office nor has it provided information about the status of this project.

**Priority: Ensure the VA responds to questions from the February 13, 2013 Committee on Veterans Affairs hearing.**

I want to thank you for asking the VA for written responses to the attached questions at the West LA VA at the February 13, 2013 hearing, "Honoring the Commitment: Overcoming Barriers to Quality Mental Health Care for Veterans." The answers to these questions will help determine how the West LA VA can improve its ability to meet the mental health needs of the veterans it serves.

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<sup>2</sup> Office of the Inspector General, *Inspection of the VA Regional Office Los Angeles, California* (May 10, 2012) (12-00245-176)

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to discuss my top priorities for veterans in the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress. I appreciate your strong commitment to our nation's veterans and want to work with you to ensure that Congress fully addresses the significant needs of veterans across the nation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'H. Waxman', is written over the printed name.

HENRY A. WAXMAN  
Member of Congress

HAW:pd

**House Veterans' Affairs Committee**  
**"Honoring the Commitment: Overcoming Barriers to Quality Mental Health Care for Veterans."**  
**February 13, 2013**

**Questions for the Record from Rep. Waxman to Dr. Robert A. Petzel, VA Under Secretary for Health**

1. Mental Health Staffing
  - a. How many full-time mental health professionals have been hired at the West LA VA since January 1, 2012?
  - b. How many part time mental health professionals have been hired at the West LA VA over that time period?
  - c. Please identify the program to which each full time and part time mental health professional has been assigned.
2. Mental Health Funding
  - a. Please identify the funding levels for mental health services at the West LA VA for FY12 and FY 13.
  - b. Please include a detailed description of how those funds are allocated across West LA VA programs.
3. Social Worker Staffing
  - a. How many social workers have been hired at the West LA VA's HUD-VASH program since January 1, 2012?
  - b. Has the VA met its set goal for the ratio between social workers and veterans?
  - c. How many additional social workers need to be hired to meet the ratio the VA set as a goal?
4. Waiting Times
  - a. What is the current average waiting time for veterans to receive mental health screenings and services at the West LA VA?
  - b. What is the average waiting time over the past 6 months?
  - c. What the median waiting time over that period?
  - d. What is the range of waiting times over that period?
  - e. If the West LA VA does not track this data on waiting times please provide an explanation of why they do not.
5. What changes in the treatment of mental health does the VA plan to implement at the West LA VA during FY13?